

Writing the Salem Witch Trials

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In his record of the pre-trial hearing of the alleged witch Rebecca Nurse, Samuel Parris, the pastor in Salem Village in 1692, made the following annotation: “This is a true account of the sume of her Examination but by reason of great noyses by the afflicted & many speakers many things are pr<ae>termitted [i.e. ‘omitted’]” (*RSWH*, no. 28).¹ In addition to giving us a picture of the often tumultuous interrogation of alleged witches during the Salem witch trials, the note also hints at the complex nature of the extant trial documents, which serve as the main sources for our knowledge about the trials. It suggests that the record is far from being the comprehensive, objective description of the hearing that we would expect from a modern trial. This raises a number of issues. What was Parris unable to record because of the raucous hearing, and what would the omitted part have contributed to our understanding of Nurse’s case? And what indeed does it mean for our interpretation of the documents that Samuel Parris, who was heavily invested in the legitimacy of the trials, is responsible for recording the official examination document? No less complex, but complex in different ways, are the contemporaneous published and unpublished accounts by observers and commentators of the trials. In addition to supplying their own or others’ direct observations of the trial proceedings, these writers frequently draw on and provide interpretations of the court documents, often with the goal of weaving a narrative that supports or refutes the legitimacy of the trials. This body of writing includes contributions by some of the most prominent personages of the period, such as the Puritan ministers Increase and Cotton Mather, as well as less known, but equally keen

observers such as the Harvard-educated mathematician Thomas Brattle and Robert Calef, a Boston merchant.

The writing of the Salem witch trials, to invoke the title of this essay, thus involved the contributions of many, with various motivations and intentions. This has resulted in a large, intricate body of interconnected writings that can only be fully understood in light of their historical and text-historical context. This chapter briefly overviews the historical events of the trials and outlines the main strands of interpretation as to why accusations of witchcraft began in Salem Village in early 1692 and exploded into an intense legal process that involved many neighboring communities. The focus of the chapter is on the characteristics of the primary sources. It provides a survey of the published and unpublished writings and demonstrates the complexity but rich potential of the records for both research and teaching.

Historical Outline

Warrants for the arrest of Sarah Good, Sarah Osburn, and Tituba were issued by magistrates John Hathorne (the ancestor of author Nathaniel Hawthorne) and Jonathan Corwin on Monday 29 February 1692 (*RSWH*, nos. 1 and 2). The accusation was suspicion of acting witchcraft on four girls and young women in Salem Village (present-day Danvers, MA). Elizabeth Parris, Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam Jr., and Elizabeth Hubbard had started exhibiting strange behaviors, falling into spasmodic fits. A medical explanation had failed, and instead the determination was witchcraft, and the group soon accused the three women of causing the afflictions. The pre-trial hearings, which were held to determine if the suspicion was justified and the three should stand trial, followed quickly on the very next day, 1 March (*RSWH*, nos. 3–6). After Tituba confessed and revealed that she had seen nine marks by practicing witches in the Devil's book (including those by Good and Osburn), a flood of accusations followed. The four afflicted listed in the initial warrant were joined by a few others who became the core group of accusers (consisting mainly of girls and young women), but many other community members stepped forward and began to relate mysterious events going back as far as 20–30 years. Neighboring communities (Andover, Haverhill, Beverly, Lynn, etc.) were soon embroiled in the witch hunt. Formal complaints were lodged, warrants for the arrests of the accused and summonses for witnesses issued, witness depositions taken, hearings held, and indictments drawn up for the trials to begin. However, the formal legal proceedings did not start until June 1692 after the new governor, Sir William Phips, had arrived from England and instituted a Court of Oyer and Terminer to hear the witchcraft cases.

Two particularly strong themes emerge from the trial documents and the observer and commentator accounts: spectral evidence and confessions. Much of the evidence presented, especially by the core group, relied on spectral affliction: the afflicted claimed to be tormented by the accused in spectral form. Naturally, this evidence could not be independently verified, but the court nevertheless accepted its legitimacy.

This practice also had many staunch supporters in the community at large: Cotton Mather wrote in defense of the procedure in his *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693). At the same time, there was also growing unease with this procedure (and other aspects of the trials). In his *Cases of Conscience*, Increase Mather (1693), Cotton's father, poignantly asked:

Whether it is not Possible for the Devil to impose on the Imaginations of Persons Bewitched, and to cause them to Believe that an Innocent, yea that a Pious person do's torment them, when the Devil himself doth it, or whether Satan may not appear in the Shape of an Innocent and Pious, as well as the Nocent and Wicked Person to Afflict such as suffer by Diabolical Molestations? (1, italics in original)

His determination was that "the Answer [...] must be Affirmative" (1). In the face of mounting opposition, Governor Phips discontinued the Court of Oyer and Terminer. Although this gave a reprieve to the accused who had been condemned or were awaiting trial in prison, it was too late for the 19 who had already hanged and one (Giles Corey) who had been pressed to death for refusing to enter a plea.

In addition to the blind belief in spectral evidence, the Court of Oyer and Terminer also changed the traditional handling of confessions of witchcraft. Confessions would normally have led to executions (in accordance with the biblical precedence of "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," Exodus 22:18). During the Salem proceedings, however, confessing became the way to escape the gallows. Tituba, who was the first to confess, was imprisoned, but not executed; those who defiantly proclaimed their innocence in the face of mounting accusations, on the other hand, were found guilty and some hanged. Not surprisingly, then, this procedure led to mass confessions. But confessors were still imprisoned, and they suffered harsh conditions over the winter of 1692 as they awaited trial after Governor Phips closed down the Court of Oyer and Terminer. When the newly instituted Superior Court of Judicature convened in January 1693 (and in subsequent months), spectral evidence was disallowed, but confessions were instead accepted into evidence (in accordance with more traditional practice). Many desperate retractions followed, which appear to have been largely ignored by the court. But sentiments had changed and the accused were acquitted by the Grand Jury or after trial or saved by pardon from Governor Phips. Although the acquitted and their relatives continued to file for restitution several decades later, the Salem witch trials had officially come to an end.

Interpretations

The scholarly interpretations of the events at Salem in 1692–1693 are many and varied, and it is not possible to do justice to all of them here. But some broader themes can be outlined, as Marc Mappen (1996) and Bernard Rosenthal (1993: 32–36), among others, have done. Some interpreters suggest that the accusers sincerely believed in the afflictions, as a result of hallucinations, mass hysteria, and mental distress

(Mappen 1996: 51–63), or that at least some of the accused were indeed practicing witches (Hansen 1969). However, not surprisingly, many current scholars (as well as commentators who were contemporaneous with the trials) have seen fraud in the behavior of especially the core group of accusers and, at best, gullibility on the part of the authorities. Whether the accusers were counterfeiting or in the grip of mass hysteria, the question remains what would have caused or spurred on such behavior. Many researchers have settled on social explanations. Although aspects of it have been criticized, one of the most well-known theories is that of Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (1974/1997). They see the trials as the culmination of the dissension between two factions in Salem Village, spearheaded by two families: the Putnams and the Porters. These families, they argue, represented different social commitments (agrarian vs. commercial) and religious values (in favor of or opposed to Samuel Parris as the Salem Village pastor), and their supporters were geographically separated in the west and east of the village. These divisions were then reflected in the makeup of the accusers (who were mostly in the Putnam camp) and the accused (who were predominantly Porter supporters). Carol F. Karlsen (1987), by contrast, explores the gender dynamics of the Salem trials as one component of a broader inquiry into witchcraft cases in New England. She notes that women who were accused of witchcraft were often in socioeconomic positions or behaved in ways that were out of line with Puritan belief systems and hence disturbed the social order. Accusing such women of witchcraft was a convenient way of eliminating such elements. Mary Beth Norton (2002) makes connections between the Salem events and the larger political climate in New England, especially the Second Indian War (or King William's War). She argues that many members of the community (some of the accusers as well as magistrates) had intimate experiences with the Indian wars, which were seen as a broader attack by the Devil on New England, and were influenced in their responses by this context.

Another interpretive lens comes from medical research. Most famously, Linnda Caporael (1976) suggests that the strange behaviors among the core accusers are consistent with ergot poisoning (created by a fungus on rye). Although this account has persisted in popular lore, the thesis was firmly debunked soon after its initial publication in the 1970s. As Nicholas P. Spanos and Jack Gottlieb (1976) show, not only does the textual evidence not support the interpretation, but there are sociohistorical and medical reasons militating against the ergot poisoning theory.

Despite many attempts to explain the sources of and motivations behind the Salem trials, not surprisingly, definitive answers remain elusive, and scholarly (as well as popular) interest continues unabated. The past couple of years alone have seen several major works on the Salem episode (Baker 2015; Ray 2015; Schiff 2015). These recent works indicate that, instead of searching for one defining factor, we should look to the peculiar mix of factors that operated during the Salem events, including broad social, political, religious, and gender-related issues as well as more local dynamics and individual personalities. While most of the scholarly attention has come from historians, there are many literary, rhetorical, and text-historical angles on the corpus of Salem writings that have yet to be explored.

The Writings of the Salem Witch Trials

Observers' Accounts and Commentaries

Before Governor Phips put a stop to publications dealing with the Salem trials in October 1692 (and even after), many prominent New Englanders joined the debate raging around the events at Salem. Circulating in print and in manuscript, these writings range from relatively straightforward eyewitness accounts to elaborate, scholarly treatments and cover a variety of genres: a letter, a fictitious dialogue, treatises, and a number of complex combinations of genres (Burr 1914). In his *Brief and True Narrative* (1692), for example, Deodat Lawson, Parris's predecessor as Salem Village pastor, briefly narrates his firsthand experiences of the happenings at Salem between 19 March and 3 April, structuring his text as a day-by-day journal. By contrast, Increase Mather's *Cases of Conscience* (1693) is a learned disquisition on the nature of spectral evidence and other aspects of witchcraft. It is carefully divided into "cases" and "arguments" and is filled with references to and quotations from secondary literature, sometimes in Latin.

While these writings have been mined extensively by historians for views on and facts about the trials, much less attention appears to have been paid to their status as "texts," their exploitation of genre conventions and intertextuality, and the rhetorical strategies employed to construct arguments and authority. A brief exploration of two of these texts is instructive in this regard, pointing to some of the avenues of research that still remain open: Thomas Brattle's unpublished letter and Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Brattle was a Harvard-educated mathematician with ties to the vibrant scientific community in England. His letter of 8 October 1692 (Burr 1914: 169–190) addressed an unnamed minister and has been billed as a "biting Enlightenment criticism" of the trial proceedings (Ray 2015: 160). Brattle's choice to write a private letter to couch his criticism may indicate that his comments were indeed intended only for the unnamed minister. The castigation of both judges and accusers is also fairly unvarnished, which would perhaps be unexpected in a widely circulated text. However, it could be argued that Brattle intended the letter to circulate in manuscript (Baker 2015: 198; Burr 1914: 168) and used the letter genre strategically to make a serious contribution to the wider debate around the Salem trials. Whether actually penned for a particular addressee or not, the private letter allowed him to be more forthright than he might have been in a published tract since he could claim that it was not written for wide public consumption even if it were circulated broadly; in other words, if the letter was "published," his defense would be that his private opinion and indiscretions were not supposed to affect the public debate, at the same time as the letter did just that. Although no direct evidence seems to exist for the extent of the letter's circulation, it is often assumed to have been widely read and to have had political impact, as, for example, by Enders A. Robinson (1991: 253).

What we find in the letter also seems to go beyond a mere description intended for the private edification of one particular addressee. It is a skillfully crafted document that makes forceful arguments against the legal procedures adopted and does so in a rhetorically sophisticated way. One example will stand as an illustration. At one point in the letter, Brattle provides a numbered list of “many things [he] cannot but admire [i.e. ‘be surprised’] and wonder at” (Burr 1914: 177). This initial formulation is then echoed at the start of the explication of each of the six points that he mentions by the phrase “I do admire” or “I cannot but admire.” Although these points are modestly framed as issues of surprise and puzzlement, the discussions that follow reveal keen observations and careful dissections of the illogical procedure of the court. Indeed, Brattle’s emphasis on logic is explicitly revealed in the fifth point, where he notes “that the Justices have thus far given ear to the Devill, I think may be mathematically demonstrated to any man of common sense” (Burr 1914: 182). The superficially modest form and phrasing of Brattle’s text thus seem to belie its sophisticated nature and intent.

Cotton Mather’s *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693) is a very different text in many respects: it was printed (and reprinted); it is a lengthy work that incorporates multiple genres and refers to many secondary sources; and it was “Published by the Special Command of His EXCELLENCY, the Governour of the Province of the *Massachusetts-Bay* in *New-England*” (1693: title page). But what it shares with Brattle’s letter is generic and rhetorical sophistication. *Wonders* is usually regarded as a political document, produced with the intent to support the judges’ procedures at Salem and the decisions by the authorities (including Governor Phips) who had allowed the trials to proceed (Baker 2015: 199); but whether Mather was actually convinced of what he wrote has been questioned (Silverman 1984: 116–17). Put together hastily and rushed into print, *Wonders* is often seen as “a jumble” or “mélange” (Silverman 1984: 115). Although the text certainly mixes genres and can be seen as wordy or repetitive, it arguably has an intended cumulative, conditioning effect. The most central account – the select cases before the Court of Oyer and Terminer – is strategically placed toward the end of *Wonders*. Mather clearly intended that the reader should be guided (or conditioned) by the chapters preceding the main account. Before learning about the Salem cases, the reader is thus presented with descriptions of the Devil’s workings in New England (supported by biblical evidence), principles of detecting witches drawn from well-known authorities, and parallel cases of witchcraft. In other words, Mather provides a lens through which to see the events in Salem Village. Arguably, this strategy is also behind presenting the five selected cases with relatively little commentary. Mather mostly limits himself to presenting the evidence against the alleged witches in the form of the depositions (paraphrased or cited verbatim from the actual court documents) and descriptions of the courtroom proceedings. To be sure, the five cases had been carefully selected and the order of their presentation was undoubtedly premeditated. But he allowed the evidence mostly to speak for itself, relying on the reader to see the events in light of the moral, religious, and geopolitical frame that he had furnished. How could the accused not be guilty when so much

evidence against them fit the larger schemes of the Devil against the Puritan experiment in New England? Although perhaps a quickly assembled “mélange,” *Wonders* was clearly not a haphazard text, but one with a clear goal supported by Mather’s rhetorical and intertextual strategies.

Trial Documents

The observers’ accounts and commentaries reveal a skillful deployment of sources, genres, and rhetorical strategies. However, it is in the trial documents themselves that we find the most vivid descriptions of what happened during the trials. Among these documents, we find narratives of affliction, such as John Westgate’s description of being persecuted by a murderous hog (*RSWH*, no. 268), William Baker’s account of mysteriously disappearing beer (*RSWH*, no. 41), and Ann Putnam Jr.’s many emphatic complaints about being tortured by witches (*RSWH*, e.g. nos. 11, 53, 249); we find defiant defenses, such as George Jacobs, Sr.’s staunch denials in the face of the interrogator’s insistent questioning, as recorded by Samuel Parris (*RSWH*, no. 133); and we see the formidable legal forces mustered against the accused in meticulously prepared legal instruments, such as indictments.

More than 900 documents have survived from the trial proceedings and their aftermath. Although these documents are by convention referred to as “court documents” as a whole, unfortunately, the actual court documents taken down during the trials before the Court of Oyer and Terminer are not extant, and only summary records remain from the trials before the Superior Court of Judicature in 1693 (Trask 2009: 54). The majority of the extant documents instead pertain to pre-trial stages of the proceedings. These documents include formal legal writings, such as indictments, arrest warrants, and summonses; and evidential materials such as pre-trial hearings, or “examinations,” and witness depositions, some of which were presented at the actual trials (Grund et al. 2009: 65–69).

Many of these documents have been available in editions since the nineteenth century (Trask 2009: 58–63). The latest edition, *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (*RSWH*; Rosenthal et al. 2009), and the work leading up to it have highlighted previously neglected aspects of the documents, especially in their production and use. Perhaps most interestingly, *RSWH* presents information on the complex scribal situation, a previously almost completely ignored issue. Much previous work seems simply to have assumed that the documents were the products of a small number of court clerks. But *RSWH* has shown that as many as 200 recorders may have been involved. The effort to identify recorders in *RSWH* reveals the surprising fact that a number of community members in Salem Village and neighboring towns contributed to the writing of the documents.² The picture that has emerged is thus very complex and underscores that the superficially very straightforward court documents are much less transparent than previously thought.

Although interesting for the historical and legal context, the more formal documents have perhaps little of what has traditionally been considered “literary” quality.

They are often very formulaic, and individual documents vary little among themselves other than in the specific details of the accusations of witchcraft. The indictment documents, for example, which outline the formal charges against an alleged witch, consist of a set of formulaic phrases. These phrases often consist of multi-word formulas, a feature that is characteristic of much legal language even today: “witchcraft & Sorceries,” “in upon & ag” (‘against’), and “hurt tortured Afflicted Pined wasted consumed. & tormented,” as in the indictment against Rebecca Nurse in *RSWH*, no. 287. In response to the rapidly multiplying accusations, the indictment documents (of which about a hundred have survived) were mass-produced by two or three recorders, who left out the information specific to each case. This information was later filled in by, usually, a different recorder as the case of a particular alleged witch was being prepared.

Even these formal documents sometimes give us insights into community, social, and gender dynamics. In arrest warrants and complaints (which initiated an official accusation of witchcraft), it was crucial to record the exact name of the accused to ensure that the correct person was targeted. Yet, in some documents, we find that the first name of an accused woman has been omitted; instead, a gap has been left for the first name to be filled in. While some of the gaps remain in the documents, a secondary recorder has often supplied the name at a later point. This phenomenon is observable in, for instance, the complaint against and warrant for the arrest of Joan Penny (*RSWH*, nos. 613, 674) and the complaint against Sarah Bassett and Susannah Roots (*RSWH*, no. 195). This handling of first names may indicate that the accusers (and/or recorders) did not know the accused well. This may certainly be the case with Bassett and Roots, who hailed from the towns of Lynn and Beverly, while the accusers, John Putnam Jr. and Thomas Putnam, were from Salem Village. Perhaps the accusers simply knew them as Goodwife or Goody Bassett and Roots.

An entirely different side of the trials is shown in the examinations. These documents represent the pre-trial hearings that were conducted once a complaint had been filed and the accused had been arrested and brought in for questioning. This interrogation would determine if an indictment should be drawn up and presented to the Grand Jury (or Jury of Inquest), which would decide whether to send the case to trial. The examinations (of which about a hundred have survived) provide a fascinating, if often disturbing, read (Grund et al. 2009: 66–67). As illustrated by the examination of Dorcas Hoar (*RSWH*, no. 102), these documents suggest a very hostile environment where those who claimed affliction would fall into fits and vociferously accuse the person interrogated, and an unnamed magistrate, who appears to assume guilt, would follow up with sharply worded questions or statements:

[Hand 1] The Exanimation of Dorcas ~~Heor~~ Hoar .2. May .1692.
 Severall of the afflicted fell into fits as soon as she was brought in.
 Eliz: Hubbard said this woman hath afflictcd me ever since last sab: was seven night,
 & hurt me ever since, & she choakt ~~her~~ her own husband.

Mary Walcott said she told me the same

Abig: Williams said this is the woman that she saw first before ever Tituba Indian or any else.

Ann Putman said this is the woman that hurts her, & the first time she was hurt by her was the sab: was seven night.

Susan: Sheldon accused her of hurting. her last moonday night.

Abig: Williams & Ann Putman said she told them that she had choakt a woman lately at Boston

Eliz: Hubbard cried why do you pinch me the mark was visible to the standers by. The Marshall said she pincht her fingers at that time.

Dorcas Hoar why do you hurt these?

I never hurt any child in my life.

It is you, or your appearance.

How can I help it?

What is it from you that hurts these?

I never saw worse than my self.

You need not see worse. They charge you with killing your husband

I never did, nor never saw you before

You sent for Goody Gale to cut your head off

What do you say to that?

I never sent for her upon that account.

What do you say about killing your husband.

Examinations like this would seem to give us an exceptional window into the interrogation, even providing the exact words used by the different parties at the hearing. However, there is reason to be skeptical about the faithfulness of these texts. As we saw at the very beginning of this chapter, Samuel Parris, who is also responsible for recording Hoar's examination, admitted to the problem of recording everything that was said during the interrogation of Rebecca Nurse because of the raucous nature of the hearing. The recording of a conversation-rate dialogue with the help of a quill and ink must also have presented severe challenges. We do know that some of the recorders of the examinations were proficient shorthand writers, Parris included (Grund 2007: 125–126); indeed, he indicates as much with his reference to "Characters," a term for shorthand, at the end of Hoar's examination by stressing that it "is a true account of the Examination of Dorcas Hoar without wrong to any party according to my original from Characters at the moment thereof" (*RSWH*, no. 102). But without direct access to the original hearing or even the shorthand version, we cannot tell how faithful many of these documents are to the original hearing. We in fact have evidence to suggest that the reliability of these documents must be treated with extreme caution and that some of the records should perhaps be seen as biased reconstructions. This evidence comes from the existence of more than one version of the same examination written by the same person, or multiple recordings of one and the same hearing taken down by different recorders. For some unknown reason, Parris prepared two versions of John

Willard's examination (*RSWH*, nos. 173 and 174). No. 173 may be an abbreviated version of no. 174, or, conversely, no. 174 may represent an expansion; the exact relationship between the two is not clear. What is clear, however, is that they present sometimes strikingly different pictures of what took place and what was said during the hearing, as illustrated in the following extracts (differences between the two versions are underlined):

***RSWH*, no. 173**

Susan: Sheldon tried to come to him, but fell down immediately.

What is the reason she cannot come near you?

They cannot come near any that are accused.

Why do you say so, they could come near Nehemiah Abbot, the children could talk with him

***RSWH*, no. 174**

Susan: Sheldon tried to come near him but fell down immediately, & he took hold of her hand with a great deal of do, but she continued in her fit crying out, O John Willard, John Willard & The ex What is the reason you could not come near him?

The black man stood between us.

They cannot come near any that are accused.

Why do you say they could not come near any that were accused: You know Nehemiah Abbot they could talk with him.

Not only are there differences on the level of formulations, but there is substantially more information in no. 174. Furthermore, in no. 173, the first question appears to be addressed to the accused (John Willard), but, in no. 174, it is addressed to the accuser (Susannah Shelden). Clearly, both versions cannot be accurate, and it raises questions about Parris's motive in producing such vastly different versions. No. 173 appears to have been used as evidence at the trial, and, if such usage should be seen as an endorsement that it represents an official version, what does one make of all the additional or dissimilar information found in no. 174? From such a staunch believer in the Salem trials as Parris, one cannot rule out that bias played a role in the production of the document.

A slightly different, but to some extent even more radical case is found in the examination of Tituba, Samuel Parris's slave. In her case, three versions have survived: *RSWH* no. 3 by tailor Ezekiel Cheever; no. 5, probably by Joseph Putnam, a wealthy Salem Village inhabitant; and no. 6 by Justice of the Peace Jonathan Corwin. The sometimes remarkable differences in these documents should probably be ascribed to different recording techniques (maybe using or not using shorthand) or perhaps different understandings of what was important enough to record. The fact that this was the very first pre-trial hearing may account for the existence of three records; similar multiple copies by different recorders are not extant for any of the other examinations. Perhaps all three recorders were officially charged to take down what took place during the hearing to ensure that nothing was missed.

In general, what these multiple copies suggest is that each examination document represents one particular recorder's understanding of what took place, recorded under difficult circumstances, and these examinations should not be taken as completely

faithful or accurate recordings (Grund 2007). This of course opens up a number of interesting questions that future research may tackle: how are different voices (male and female, accused and accuser, core group member and peripheral witnesses, etc.) represented in the examinations? How does the voice of the recorder make itself known in the documents (Doty 2007)?

The witness depositions (or testimonies) provide similarly fascinating, but complex, reads. The procedure of recording depositions in seventeenth-century New England differed significantly from current legal conventions. Nowadays a deposition is given under oath and taken down by a court reporter. At the time of the witch trials, anyone could record a deposition and submit it to the court for possible admission into evidence; the witness would swear an oath only when the deposition was read in court during the trial (or Grand Jury hearing) and the deponent was called to verify its authenticity (Grund 2012b: 42–43). It is thus not too surprising that we find a very large number of recorders in the corpus of some 400 extant depositions. Many filed depositions written by themselves, while others called on friends, family, or other people with known writing ability to record their statements. Our understanding of who these writers were is still limited. The information that we do have suggests interesting ties between recording and particular communities, professions, social standings, factions, and personal relationships. A straightforward example of connections between a recorder and a community is found in the case of Thomas Chandler, selectman in Andover (Grund, Burns, and Peikola 2014: 45). He recorded the testimony for himself (*RSWH*, no. 631) and other inhabitants in Andover (*RSWH*, nos. 465 and 657). A more complex relationship between deponent and recorder is seen in Thomas Putnam's scribal output, which we will return to below.

With so many writers (of clearly varying familiarity with deposition writing), it is only to be expected that the Salem depositions would vary a great deal in their format and structure (Grund et al. 2009: 67; Grund 2012b). But what they all capture (in one way or another) is the deponents' narratives of alleged experiences with witchcraft, and, in a few cases, their support for an accused. Some stories take the shape of conversations between the afflicted and the alleged witch (often appearing in spectral shape) or apparitions of deceased people, as in Susannah Shelden's deposition in *RSWH*, no. 163. Other stories, such as Samuel and Mary Abbey's deposition in *RSWH*, no. 352, are more "indirect," describing mysterious events involving the death of cattle or other animals:

[Hand 1] may 17th of In the yeare 92

the Complainge of Sewzanah Shellten saith that Elizabeth Colson Remaynes in Afflicting of the {said} Shellten night & day. And Allso m^{es} white also John willard Remaines in Afflic^{ng} of hur both day and night also m^e English and. his wife Remaines afflicting of hure both night and day JGooge Jacobs and his wife afflicting of hur the last lords day and tempting the said Shellten ~~to sete~~ hur strikethru hand to the booke thay both appearing yesterday againe And would. haue hur sete hur hand to the booke the said Shelten said she would not then she she said she would stabb hur then sudenly she Res<ea>ued A sore wound one hur lifte side then: Ellizebeth Colson stabbing of hur one the back Right against the other woundes {soe that she spente blood} then goody prockter Appearing

to hur and Afflicting of hur and tempting hur to sete hur hand to the bo{o}ke And last night goody prockter Appearing againe and would ha{u}e hu{r}e sete hur hand to the booke and towld hur that she hade sete hur <ha>nd to the booke a grete while agooe (RSWH, no. 163)

[Hand 1] Samuel Abbey of Salem Villiage Aged 45. Years or thereabouts and Mary Abbey his wife aged 38 years or thereabout: Deposeth and saith:

That about this Time Three Years past W^m Good and his wife Sarah Good being Destitute of an howse to dwell in these Deponents out of Charity, they being Poor. lett them live in theirs some time, vntill that the said Sarah Good was of so Turbulant a Spirritt, Spitefull, and so Mallitiously bent, that these Deponent<s> could not Suffer [^]{her} to Live in their howse any Longer; and was forced for Quiettness sake to turne she y^e said Sarah, with her husband, out of theire howse, ever since, which is about two Years 1/2 agoe; the said Sarah Good, ~~hath~~ {not} [1–2 words overstruck] ~~to the s^d deponents~~ ~~hath~~<?> hath carried it very Spitefully & Mallitiously, toward them, the winter following after the said Sarah was gone from our howse, we began to Loose Cattle, and Lost severall after an vnusall Manner: in a drupeing Condition and yett they would Eate: and your Deponents have Lost after that manner 17 head of Cattle within this two years, besides Sheep, and Hoggs: and both doe beleive they Dyed by witchcraft, the said William Good [“William Good” written over “Samuel Abbey”] on [“on” written over “in”] the last [^]{of} may, was twelve months, went home to his wife the s^d Sarah Good, and told her, what a sad Accident had fallen out, she asked what:, he answered that his neighbour Abbey had lost two Cowes, both dyeing within halfe an hower of one another, the s^d Sarah good said she did not care if he the said Abbey had Lost all the Cattle he had, {as y^e said Jn^o Good told vs} Just that very Day, that the said Sarah good was taken up, we yo^e Deponents had a Cow that could not rise alone, but since presently after she was taken up, the said Cow was well and could rise so well, as if she had ailed nothing: she the said Sarah good: ever since these Dponants turned [^]{her} out of their howse she hath ~~carried~~ behaved her selfe very crossely & Mallitiously, to them & their Children calling their Chillren Vile Names and hath threatened them often./. (RSWH, no. 352)

The depositions provide rich opportunities for a number of analytical approaches, including investigations into the overall structuring of narration, the separation between in-group and out-group (or “other”), the representation of speech and different voices, or the construction of authority. The gender dynamic of these documents is also very complex: so far, we have no evidence of women writing depositions for themselves or others, and the question thus remains whether and how women’s testimony was filtered by male recorders.

In terms of “authority,” the two depositions appeal to very different epistemological bases. Sheldon’s authority rests primarily in her own affliction. She also attributes speech to the afflictors, who tempt her to write her name (“sete hur hand”) in the Devil’s book, a common theme in the Salem depositions. This kind of speech attribution undoubtedly contributed not only to dramatizing the events but also to making the claims more believable: these are, according to Sheldon, the witches’ own words, including a threat of stabbing and Goody Procter’s own confession of “set[ting] hur <ha>nd to the booke a grete while agooe” (Grund 2012a: 29–30).

In the deposition by the Abbeys, authority is constructed differently. The deponents do not appeal to direct affliction or conversations with alleged witches; instead the Abbeys relate circumstantial and hearsay evidence that is only tied to Good indirectly. Good is said to be “Turbulant a Spirritt, Spitefull, and so Mallitiously bent” that they had to evict her. This, they report, led to more malicious behavior on Good’s part and the mysterious death of cattle, which they believe to be by witchcraft; one cow even mended after Good had been arrested. Further evidence is drawn from a third party (hearsay) report (provided by Good’s own husband) that Good showed uncharitable indifference to the deponents’ loss of cattle. The final lines again stress her unruly behavior and add that threats were used, an alleged hallmark of witches (Kamensky 1997: 152–154, 160). What we find, in other words, is a kind of equation: on one side, we have mysterious events; on the other side, we have a person who is connected to the afflicted and who behaves physically and verbally as was generally expected from a witch. Ergo, Good must be a witch and she must have perpetrated the killings of their cattle by witchcraft.

A very significant, but not yet fully understood aspect of the corpus of Salem depositions is the prominent role of Thomas Putnam in recording testimonies: he is wholly or partly responsible for writing about 130 depositions, and is thus by far the most frequent deposition writer. A former parish clerk, militia sergeant, and father of one of the most insistent accusers (Ann Putnam Jr.), Putnam has long been seen as a central figure in the trials (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974/1997; Robinson 1991), and, of course, Arthur Miller affords him an important place in his play *The Crucible*, based on the Salem trials. But *RSWH* has revealed a different component to his involvement: his scribal activities, which have yet to be fully evaluated (Ray 2015: 94–104).

The Putnam collection of writings shows a number of characteristics. The majority of his depositions contain testimony by the core group of accusers; no other recorder writes more than a few for this group (except for Samuel Parris, who records a number for his niece, Abigail Williams). These core depositions often show remarkable similarities (Hiltunen and Peikola 2007). *RSWH*, nos. 10 and 11, written by Putnam, provide a case in point:

[Hand 1] The Deposition of Elizabeth Hubburd aged about 17 years who testifieth and saith that on the 27th of february 1691/92 I saw the Apperishtion of Sarah osborn the wife of Ex Allexander osborn who did most greivously tortor me by pricking and pinching me most dreadfully and so she continewed hurting me most greivously tell the first of march 1691/92: being the day of hir Examination ~~{being first of march}~~ and then also Sarah osborn did tortor me most greivously by pinching and pricking me most dre<ad>fully and also seuerall times sence Sarah osborn has afflicted me and urged me to writ<e> in hir book (*RSWH*, no. 10)

[Hand 1] The Deposition of Ann putnam who testifieth and saith that on the 25th of february 1691/92 I saw the Apperishtion of Sarah osborn the wife of E Allexandar osborn who did Immediatly tortor me most greivously by pinching and pricking me

dreadfully and so she continewed most dreadfully to afflict me tell the first day of march being the day of hir Examination and then also she did tortor me most dreadfully in the time of hir Examination: and also seuerall times sence ~~good~~ Sarah osburn has afflicted me and urged me to writ in hir book (RSWH, no. 11)

The depositions vary little in formulation and even less in content, and similar words and phrases recur, such as *most grievously*, *torture*, *pinching*, *pricking*, *most dreadfully*, *afflict* (Grund 2012b: 46–47; Hiltunen and Peikola 2007: 59; Ray 2015: 100). How does one account for such striking similarities? Fraudulent behavior on the part of Putnam is certainly plausible. He could have produced the depositions without even consulting the actual deponents, hence appropriating their voices for his own purposes. At the same time, alternative explanations are possible. We know from the examination documents, the observers' accounts, and the commentaries that members of the core group behaved very similarly. Perhaps this extended also to their verbal behavior: they colluded to report their experiences in very similar ways to keep the message consistent. Whether they actually used the exact terms as recorded in Putnam's depositions is, of course, another issue. He may have transformed their formulations into something that would capture their narrative in language that was appropriate for the legal context. Such reformulation of oral narrative into witness depositions is not unexpected and probably happened in depositions throughout the Salem corpus; Grund and Walker (2011: 44–56) have shown how this kind of reworking occurred in contemporaneous depositions in England. Yet another possibility is that Putnam simply used a template deposition that was changed as necessary, convinced that the specifics were not essential as long as the substance of the accusers' experiences was captured. Clearly, complex issues need to be weighed in determining Putnam's role during the trials.

Concluding Remarks

The Salem witch trials in 1692–1693 have held popular and scholarly fascination for centuries. The complex corpus of writings, with its ambiguities and textual gaps, continues to spur reinterpretations of the events at Salem. The trials have become a metaphor for religious, social, and political oppression (Adams 2008), and they have been exploited for various literary purposes (not least in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables* and Arthur Miller's *Crucible*). As I hope to have shown, the original trial documents and contemporaneous accounts also deserve attention as "literature" in themselves. This chapter highlights that "writing the Salem witch trials" was clearly not a process of simple recording of basic facts (despite what some court documents and other accounts may intimate), but one of filtering, positioning, and framing of the events from the multiple perspectives of the various contributors. It is on this mediation of the surviving documents in particular that much literary, rhetorical, and text-historical work remains to be done.

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NOTES

- 1 All examples from the trial records are taken from *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (2009), edited by Rosenthal et al., which faithfully reproduces the spelling, capitalization, and punctuation of the original manuscripts. Parenthetical citations in this essay cite *RSWH* and the number of the document, a form of citation that has become conventional for this volume and is recommended by the editors.
- 2 Matti Peikola and I continue to work on a collaborative project trying to identify these recorders.

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FURTHER READING

- Roach, M. (2002). *The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege.* New York: Cooper Square. A very informative day-by-day account of the trials, based on a careful consideration of many sources.
- Salem Witch Trials: Documentary Archive and Transcription Project* (created and maintained by B. Ray.) <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/home.html>. A wonderful resource that contains, for example, images of the original documents, biographical notes about some of the most important participants in the trials, and maps.

SEE ALSO: CHAPTER 4 (THE PURITAN CULTURE OF LETTERS); CHAPTER 21 (MANUSCRIPTS, MANUFACTS, AND SOCIAL AUTHORSHIP); CHAPTER 22 (COSMOPOLITAN CORRESPONDENCES).